

Washington Roundup

Henry's Slant

Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger directed the Central Intelligence Agency to slant U.S. estimates of the Soviet Tupolev Backfire bomber's range capability, White House officials are charging. Kissinger ordered that the range estimate be reduced to coincide with the present U.S. position in the strategic arms negotiations now under way behind the scenes by Kissinger, according to a White House staff member. Other Administration officials corroborate the story. Kissinger already has conceded to the Soviets that the Backfire will not be considered in the heavy bomber category in the treaty negotiations and is making sure intelligence estimates confirm his position, the White House official added.

The way in which the estimate was derived was through intelligence data provided to McDonnell Douglas. The aerospace firm completed an analysis under contract for the CIA to determine the supersonic Backfire's capability. A 3,500-naut. mi. range estimate reached by McDonnell Douglas was accurate, the White House official said, but the data provided were not all of the information available to U.S. intelligence officers. Only those data the CIA wanted to provide the company were offered to achieve the desired results supporting Kissinger's position, according to the official.

Different Approach

Similar study is now in progress for the Pentagon by McDonnell-Douglas, but it is based on a different set of data—all the information available to Defense Dept. intelligence officials. That study's preliminary results revealed the Backfire's range is closer to the original U.S. intelligence estimate of 6,000 naut. mi., clearly marking the aircraft in the heavy bomber category that would be counted in the 2,400 strategic delivery vehicle limit set in the Ford-Brezhnev Vladivostok agreement. The Ford Administration is preparing to consummate a treaty based on Vladivostok permitting the Soviets to operate the Backfire as an intermediate-range bomber and through other concessions limiting U.S. cruise missiles.

Since the McDonnell Douglas/CIA study, the Pentagon has pulled together top-ranked propulsion and aerodynamic experts from around the nation to examine the study. They have concluded there is no validity in the estimate of the Backfire's range being only 3,500 naut. mi. McDonnell Douglas officials declined to talk to AVIATION WEEK & SPACE TECHNOLOGY about the studies, claiming national security is involved.